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Adlai E. Stevenson III got his first taste of Asia while serving as a platoon commander in the U.S. Marines during the Korean War.

In 1975, he traveled for the first time to China on official business as a U.S. senator.

Today, at age 76, Stevenson has witnessed from the front lines how China's economy has been growing at lightening speeds. As chairman of SC&M Investment Management Corp. in Chicago, Stevenson has worked with several Asian funds seeking investments in U.S. public equities.

"It's no longer an emerging dragon. That dragon has emerged a long time ago ... And that dragon is on the move," Stevenson said Friday at the 10th annual Economic Outlook breakfast at Lake Forest Graduate School of Management in Lake Forest.

About 300 business, academic and community leaders gathered to analyze how China's economy, the world's fastest growing, has been affecting the U.S. economy, the world's largest. Rapid productivity growth, cheap labor, intellectual property worries, and rapid profitability in China were discussed at the program.

Other speakers included Steven H. Ganster, managing director of Technomic Asia; U.S. Congressman Mark Kirk; and Sandy Lincoln, chief market strategist for Wayne Hummer Asset Management.

Stevenson said China's investments do not necessarily follow political cycles, as in the U.S., but are more pragmatic.

"The world is beating a path to China and where are the Americans?" Stevenson said.

He said American businessmen need to develop relationships of trust and work with good lawyers to protect their intellectual property rights and investments there.

“China will be the driving force in this century, like the United States was in the last century,” he said. “Whether we meet the opportunities or the challenges isn’t up to the Chinese. It’s up to us.”

Sandy Lincoln, chief market strategist with Wayne Hummer Asset Management, which has offices throughout the suburbs, has tracked how China reached its current rapid growth status, studying data since 1948.

While the U.S. has had many leadership changes, China has had just a few, affecting how each country dealt with inflation and recessions.

He also cautioned investors on Chinese stock risks. In some instances, a single stock could impact up to 50 percent of the value of a particular index, creating high investment risk.

“And those stocks may not do well because the company doesn’t keep good books ... There are still a number of state-owned enterprises that have 20 percent to 40 percent of loans at China banks and are non-performing and many have negative net worth,” said Lincoln.